



Pitts, F. H. (2014). Precariousness and the 'end of salarization' in the informational society. *Lo Squaderno*, 31, 11-14.
<http://www.losquaderno.professionaldreamers.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/losquaderno31.pdf>

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Precariousness and the 'end of salarization' in the informational society

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In this piece, I will critically reflect upon some of the claims made about precariousness and the end of salarization in the context of an informational society. The main source and target of the critique will be one of the most notable early renderings of the topic, that of Manuel Castells, with additional material from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. The account will conclude, following Paolo Virno's negative rendition of Marx's thesis of the general intellect, that precariousness does not herald the end of salarization and the traditional capital-labour relation, but rather its reinforcement.

In his *Rise of the Network Society* (1996), Castells outlines his vision of a sweeping technological transformation characterized by the decentralization, dispersal and flexibilization of human relations in the informational society, that is, the guise that predominantly Western capitalist economies have taken under the increasing penetration of information and communications technology (ICT) into every pore of production and everyday life (ibid., p. 21). The way in which ICT permits the flexibilization of labour processes across space and time, for Castells, suggests a tendency towards a radical restructuring of the traditional relationship between employer and employee and the 'end of salarization'. Thus, precariousness is linked to the destruction of the wage relationship. The principal way in which such reorganization is permitted through the use of ICT is by allowing the decentralization of labour tasks across space and the communication of labour tasks across time. These two functions result in a tendency towards the 'individualization of labour in the labour process' and, by extension, an end to salarization and the traditional relationship between labour and capital (ibid., p. 265). In a nutshell, for Castells 'the traditional form of work, based on full-time employment, clear-cut occupational assignments, and a career pattern over the lifecycle is being slowly but surely eroded away' (ibid., p. 268). Castells writes that:

between one-quarter and one-third of the employed population of major industrialized countries (including self-employment) does not follow the classic pattern of a full-time job with a regular working schedule. The number of workers in variable job assignments is rapidly increasing everywhere. In addition, a considerable proportion of full-time workers (probably a majority of the professional labor force) are heading toward flexible time schedules, generally increasing their work load. The technological ability to reintegrate in a network of stored information contributions from various workers at various times induces the constant variation of the actual time of work performance, undermining the structuring capacity of working time over everyday life (ibid., p. 442).

Two claims are being made here. One concerns full-time workers, whose working schedules are seen to have incorporated a greater degree of flexibility. This is proposed to render their

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relation to the formal confines of employment more precarious, and their relationship to the workplace, employer command and so on more tenuous, whilst in effect 'increasing their work load.' The second concerns the growing proportion of properly 'precarious' workers employed in contingent, temporary, part-time and non-standard labour that does not conform to the traditional structure of the full-time job.

It is this precariousness which defines the new relationship between labour and capital posited by Castells. The complementary accounts of both Castells and Hardt and Negri are suffused with a kind of optimistic enthusiasm for the changes deemed to be taking place. It should be noted that both theorizations admit of downsides, such as the vulnerability of workers 'farmed out in a flexible network' (Castells 1996, p. 279) or the way

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in which new conditions 'place labour in a weakened bargaining position', releasing capital from negotiation with fixed labouring populations in fixed territories (Hardt and Negri 2001, p. 297). However, Castells extols the 'greater freedom for better-informed workers' encapsulated in the glamorous icon of the 'networker', the 'necessary agent of the network enterprise'. Indeed, the influx of information technology erodes away salarization by freeing the worker from the factory floor as automation reduces the labouring task to a simple computer command to be carried out by machines (1996, p. 242). Hardt and Negri are even more effusive in their praise of the new relationship. The account put forward by Hardt and Negri needs to be located in the context of the way in which they see the changes in employment as stemming not from capital but from the immanent desires of 'the multitude'; but however voluntaristic the conception, their vision of a new kind of cooperation between workers completely divorced from the direction of capital and conducted across time and space, which possesses the 'potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism' (2001, p. 294), is an unabashed affirmation of the new employment relation the likes of which Castells only toys with expressing. Thus, precarization and the social circumstances that give rise to it are celebrated as a possible means by which the continuing hold of the capital-labour wage relation can be loosened.

However, the very way in which both Castells and Hardt and Negri perceive of the new employment relationship, equipping workers with increasing capacities the further their proximity from the traditional framework of capitalist control, invites a critique of the thesis of the end of salarization whereby we may say, instead, that precariousness does not threaten salarization but protects it. Put simply, whilst many aspects of work have changed, specifically in the way labour-time and the working day are structured, the fundamental relationship between capital does not change. As Doogan asserts, 'capital needs labour' (2009, p. 206). The flexibilization and informationalization of the labour process - and the precarization that results - stand not as evidence against this, but as examples of the way in which capital has adapted the organization of production in order to maximize the amount of value it can derive from the labour at its disposal once that labour has been purchased through the market device of the wage, and, by extension, the 'salary'. Castells misperceives the wholly plausible tendency of precariousness and its contributory factors of flexibilization and informationalization as resulting in a tendency towards the end of salarization, when in fact they serve to bolster the social and economic relation between capital and labour - namely

that of the wage– of which the concept of a ‘salary’ is the mere expression. Highlighting the impermeable and foundational nature of the wage relation, Doogan posits that non-standard employment patterns actually extend the orbit of the capital relation, ‘enhancing labour market attachment rather than disaffiliation.’ Only by ignoring the fundamental way in which capital commodifies labour power in the shape of the wage relation can one seriously envisage precarization as a ‘qualitative shift[] in employment relations that can support societal transformation’ (ibid., p. 210–211). Salarization is by definition that process of buying labour-power with the wage; as Marx hypothesized, it is the precondition to the labour process, as opposed to the distribution of rewards afterwards (Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, pp. 67–8). Without it, capitalist production is impossible; it would not, indeed, be capitalism in any real sense.

It is a theoretical ally of Hardt and Negri, Paolo Virno, who gives the best treatment of the themes of Rise of the Network Society, accepting that the changes Castells posits have taken place in the world of work whilst stopping short of seeing an end to salarization and the liberation of workers from capitalist command. Virno (2001) draws upon Marx’s developmental, tentative conception of the general intellect outlined in the Grundrisse (1973), to paint a picture of the way in which increased ‘freedom’ from the formal infrastructure of the labour process is turned to capital’s advantage as a means whereby the bond between employee and employer can be strengthened. As does Castells, Marx states that the increase in machinery in the labour-process displaces human labour to the extent that the activity of workers is reduced to a purely supervisory or regulatory role alongside the new chief actor of the labour process, the machine, weakening the role of labour-time as the measure of human productive activity. This technological leap brings about the possibility of a social development on a massive scale, as workers, freed from physical subordination to the means of production and newly possessive of the increased ‘power to enjoy’ in their disposable time, avail themselves of great advances in their intellectual and cooperative capabilities. In defining the ‘general intellect’ so enabled, Marx makes the assertion that the capacities developed in the worker’s new free time will reinsert themselves into the production process without coercion as fixed capital, incorporating the worker only at a distance, rather than as a constituent part of the capital relation (ibid., pp. 705–6).

However, against the portrayal of greater freedom given in Marx’s original outline, Virno’s considered account of the reality of the general intellect disavows any temptation to claim that these conditions are those we are party to today, asserting instead that this greater freedom is reconciled with and channelled back into the labour-capital relation. Virno, like Marx and Castells, accepts that technology, when it fails to subordinate workers ever further to its command, has opened up time in which the worker may devote his energies to other tasks, what Castells correctly identifies as a ‘diversification of working schedules and patterns’ as opposed to a definitive shortening of work time (1996, p. 442). Furthermore, like Marx, Virno claims that the results of this precarisation do find their way back into the production process. However, Virno presents an account of the situation whereby the emancipatory content of precariousness, flexibilisation and the general intellect it fosters is neutered, its benefits ploughed by capital into ever-increasing control over the organization of time and the reduction of human activity to a subservient function of the imperative to produce and profit. Virno writes that ‘[w]hat is learned, carried out and consumed in the time outside labour is then utilized in the production of commodities’ (Virno 2001). As Virno concludes, rather than destabilizing capitalist production, the general intellect, and the precarious organization of time around it, has in fact become ‘the stabilizing component’ of the capitalist

mode of production' (1996, pp. 22–3), and thus of salarization.

The principal charge that can be brought against Castells is that of being too underestimating of the capacity of capital to adapt to economic imperatives. Capital has reinforced the relationship with labour through precariousness, flexibilization and informationalization: the wage relation is as strong as ever, diversifying and expanding into new forms and areas of life. The characteristics of contemporary capitalism that Castells summarizes in the 'end of salarization' thesis do not mark the disintegration of the capital-labour relation, but rather its renewal and fortification. Despite the potential presented by precariousness for a recalibration of the capital-labour relation, it exists today in the service of salarization rather than anything otherwise.

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